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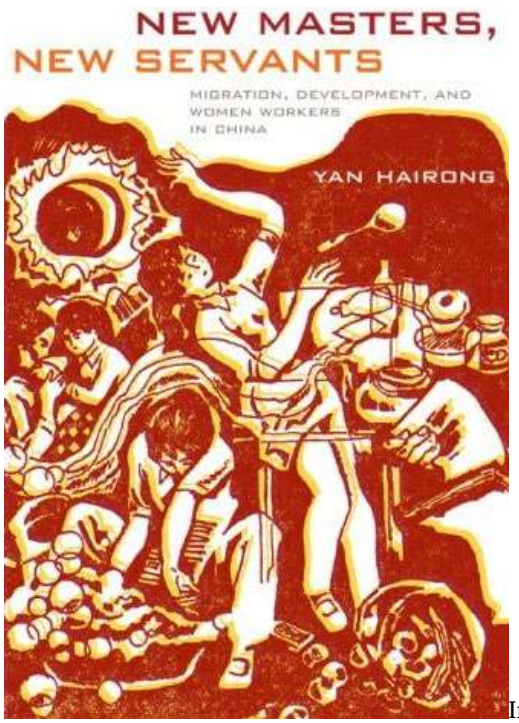
1 Yan Hairong, New Masters, New Servants: Migration, Development, and Women Workers in China, Durham, Duke Univeristy Press, 2008, 316 pp.



In New Masters, New Servants by Yan Hairong, female migrant workers and their subjection to the politics and processes of post-socialist China are the object of dense and skilful analysis. Using domestic worker narratives from her fieldwork and from literary and media accounts, Yan examines

how these women's experiences are shaped by discriminatory state-sponsored discourses, the market economy, and echoes of past significations associated with "masters" and "servants." She deftly explores conflicting discourses and practices characteristic of many unequal labour relationships in China's economy, such as the workers' fruitless pursuit of a modern urban identity in the city, where only low-class subject positions are available.

2 In the first chapter Yan discusses how domestic workers and rural youth reject the countryside, where women sacrifice their personal development to marriage and its ensuing burdens. She analyses outmigration first during the Mao era, and then after the countryside was "emaciated" by post-Mao state policy and rendered barren in rural imaginaries. Under Mao, in spite of claims of gender equality, rural women were never actually liberated from the gendered structures of work and social participation, and were stigmatised for undertaking urban domestic work. Rural China is now reconceptualised as the polar opposite to the modern, civilised city. Youth migrate in the hopes of defining their own "personhood" (p. 50), but cannot shake off the label of surplus rural labour.

3 The second chapter investigates the development of polarised roles for educated urbanites and their rural counterparts whom the state has recruited to attend to intellectuals' domestic labour needs. Yan uses examples from literature to consider the impossibility of a perfect baomu (maid), someone who works hard for low pay, yet who is sophisticated and prescient about her employer's needs. As the demand for domestic workers has grown, employers have become more anxious to maximise their workers' physical and emotional labour and appropriate behaviour. To this end, employers often request young migrants, associated with low suzhi ("personal quality") and malleability, to be remodelled into obedient maids.

4 Yan then dedicates a chapter to the normalisation of suzhi and its role in the neoliberal discourse of development. Although suzhi is an amorphous concept, it has great discursive power and appeal when used to link "human subjectivity, culture and consciousness... and the rate of Development" (p. 119). Regarding development, rural people have been doubly left behind. They are abandoned by the party-state, which dismisses its responsibility for poverty caused by rural exploitation for market gain by claiming that people need "cultural poverty relief." This means they are not only supposed to lift themselves out of poverty, but are blamed for hindering development because of their low suzhi. Labour recruitment and migration become the solution to raising the suzhi of rural people, who can then be "modernised" in cities, and migration serves as an ad hoc fix for poverty and underdevelopment.

5 Chapter 4 focuses on the themes of production, consumption, and modern identity and explains the implications of domestic workers' prescribed identity. Although the women seek more urban lifestyles, they can neither escape their low subject position as workers nor hide their rusticity. Yan brings the reader into the employment agency, where new migrants are disciplined and informed of their new identity as labourers and objects of consumption. Wealth enables urbanites to achieve a modern identity, synonymous with an urban consumer lifestyle, and the right to impose a "baomu" (maid) role on workers. Bounded by their low status and reputed low suzhi, workers can never be modern equals in the city, and to win admiration in the countryside they must display the trappings of consumerism, and hide the reality of migrant labour.

6 Yan then discusses how China's governmentality is designed to push migrants to contribute to development. Migrant women are urged to pursue self-development and improve their suzhi through work; these are gains that supposedly offset low wages and poor treatment. To cultivate a harmonious society supported by labourers, the state employs keywords that depoliticise class conflict and blur the distinction between dagong de (wage-labourers) and others. Although Yan presents these quixotic official discourses as prevalent, domestic workers are clearly separated from higher-status others in daily practice. Yan qualifies this stark difference by examining narratives of workers struggling between their self-value and acceptance of official discourses, and who experience changing awareness of their private, work, and state development roles.

7 The final chapter summarises migrant workers' precarious situation and suggests that they can achieve at best mixed success. Mass migration, along with development policy and practice, has left the countryside depleted and desolate. The author presents the workers as "liminal subjects" who waste their lives in the city for little gain. For Yan, migrants' self-worth is significantly determined by their perseverance and participation in the urban economy. She focuses exclusively on young workers who have the most vivid dreams of modernity and hopes for self-development. The reader should keep in mind that many slightly older married workers frequently migrate for self-sacrificial reasons, enduring hardship to earn money for their families. In their case, self-worth is determined by successful provision.

8 With historical grounding and compelling narratives and analysis, Yan effectively critiques grand discourses such as development, which trickle down to shape the path of migrant workers, and deny them a fair place in the urban economy. The extensive discussion of suzhi contributes greatly to understanding how this uniquely Chinese concept is employed by the elite and how it sustains inequality. However, suzhi also has a significant moral component that allows workers to judge themselves as having superior qualities to immoral employers, despite their own lack of cosmopolitanism. Yan's clear discussion of how the subjected worker is constructed is significant, because of the implicit expectation that many domestics will perform their duties from a subjugated position, not unlike the servants of old. Her accomplished and insightful book is particularly valuable to scholars of China, gender, and development studies as it draws together ethnographic accounts with relevant political and economic trends and discourses of the post-Mao era to theoretically untangle how and why migrant women have ended up as servants to the new China.